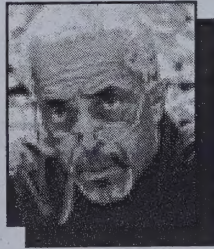


POLITICS 411

By Maynard Eaton



Is Atlanta a Black Gay and Lesbian Capital?

For the past 20 years or so, Atlanta has reportedly been among the top five cities in the nation where gays and lesbians are both populous and powerful. By most accounts, New York, San Francisco and Chicago are considered the top three with Atlanta ranking close behind.

The heterosexual community is convinced that among black gay men and lesbian women and bisexuals the widely held perception is that Atlanta is also a Mecca for their lifestyle. But that may be more fiction than fact, suggests Craig Washington, a gay activist and writer Black Gay Pride Festival organizer.

"It's muted and mixed," he opines of Atlanta's so-called status. "There is a high number of black gay and lesbians that you can see because of the organizations; because of the clubs and such, but there are a lot of people who are same sex attracted that don't necessarily identify as gay and lesbian, and are not as visible in

comparison with other cities."

That means Atlanta's black gay men and lesbians are largely still in the closet, and more reticent to show their colors and vigorously exercise their political clout than their white counterparts who can count in their camp Cathy Woolard, the president of Atlanta's City Council, and a growing and ever influential gay business community.

"White gay and lesbians, definitely, wield a lot more political clout, just as white people in our society have a much more financial and political power," Washington surmises.

For more than a decade, the Atlanta Black Pride Weekend-Labor Day events have been a bit player in the tapestry of the city's bustling lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. This year's affair was billed as a celebration of diversity captained by Congressman John Lewis as its honorary chairperson.

"For a lot of reasons it's difficult for most black gays and lesbians to be honest and upfront about who they are because of the level of homophobia in our black community," Washington laments. "Yes, there is definitely a level of resistance to accepting black gays and lesbians when they are out, when they are open."

Despite the emergence, and to some degree an acceptance of the black gay lifestyle, it remains a cultural controversy within most class levels of African Americans in Atlanta. While some of us refuse to admit or acknowledge it, we are apt to find gay relatives in many of our families, and gay members in many of our church congregations. Their presence is

palpable and ubiquitous.

"In many black churches the pastor will vilify black gays and lesbians, they will condemn their own people and will scripture to exclude and judge and isolate people; people who are actively working in the church and paying their tithes," Washington complains. "It's akin to a battered child or battered wife syndrome."

The recent Morehouse College flap, where a student was criminally assaulted by a bat wielding assailant because he was perceived to be gay proved to be a tragic example of how homophobic and intolerant too many blacks still are, and how substantively black gays have integrated themselves within all segments of Atlanta's social, educational, business and entertainment society. It remains to be proven the extent of their political clout although the upcoming cycle of elections – beginning with the special election for Fulton County Commission Chair – will likely be a telling test.

"I don't think black gays and lesbians have established their definitive place yet in Atlanta," opines Washington. "There is plenty of support within black communities, and I think there is also a great deal of rejection, denial and abuse."

Like it or not, to be sure the often shadowy, surreptitious black gay and lesbian community is a growing and ever present force – with seemingly no consensus political persuasion – that is positioning itself to be recognized and reckoned with by city and county candidates.

anniversary of 9-11. However, when it sounds as if there is a little theater involved the pain is doubly as

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